

second budget of his administration, a strong, forward-looking, and optimistic vision of our country's potential. It is a budget calling for greater investments in the things that make the biggest difference in the lives of middle-class families and in those working to get to the middle class: more support for our schools, increased funding for childcare and healthcare services, strong investments in clean energy and climate change mitigation, support for our farmers and small businesses, as well as relief for our strained supply chains.

The Republican leader asserted yesterday that the President's budget is "fundamentally disconnected" from what America needs right now. This begs the question: Just how does the Republican leader think the recovery of the past 12 months came to pass?

We have seen the greatest jobs recovery in history, the strongest economic surge in 40 years, and a steady return to normal after the worst health crisis of modern times. Does he think it happened by magic? Of course not. These were the results of the right leadership pursuing the right policies at the right moment in our country: robust investments in vaccines, aid for families trying to feed their kids through a crisis, help for businesses and local communities struggling to stay open.

And as our recovery continues under President Biden, Republicans seem to think the right answer is to short-change the American people and cut off vital resources that help our country grow.

Republicans can't stand the thought of asking the ultrarich to pay their fair share, and as a result, efforts to strengthen the middle class, which would be paid for by taxes on those at the very top, are anathema to them. Keeping the wealthy wealthy is more important for Republicans than strengthening the middle class.

Republicans, indeed, seem to think it is "fundamentally disconnected" to increase investments in things like public education, Pell grants, title 1, which helps kids most at need. Republicans believe it is somehow wasteful or far left to dare help families afford childcare and pre-K, which never have been pricier than they are today.

And beholden as they are to corporate polluters, Republicans seem to think it is radical for the Federal Government to dedicate resources to a clean energy future: more renewables, more clean cars right here from America, and a more prosperous planet for our kids and our grandkids.

But, of course, Republicans think it is perfectly fine to try and rip away healthcare for millions of Americans and push trillion-dollar tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the wealthy, but helping the middle class with childcare and education and healthcare is a bridge too far for our Republican friends—sad.

For all these reasons, the contrast between President Biden's budget and

the vision we are seeing coming from Republicans is stark and glaring. One budget, ours, is for the working and middle class; the other, the Republican budget, is an offering entirely for the ultrawealthy.

NOMINATION OF LISA DENELL COOK

Mr. President, now on the Cook nomination, today the Senate will continue its work of advancing President Biden's well-qualified nominees. Last night, I filed cloture on five additional nominees, and this morning the Senate will vote on a motion to discharge Ms. Lisa Cook from the Banking Committee. As a reminder, a motion to discharge is necessary in this Congress whenever a nominee receives a deadlocked vote in committee, so the steps we are taking later today are exceedingly important, but, frankly, it is unfortunate that they are necessary at all.

Not very long ago, a nominee of Ms. Cook's qualifications would have sailed toward final confirmation with bipartisan support. She serves on the advisory board of the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago and is a professor of Economics at Michigan State. Coming from humble beginnings in rural Georgia, where her family fought back against racial segregation, she would be the first Black woman ever to sit on the Federal Reserve Board of Governors. She is truly historic, in addition to being deeply qualified.

For as much as Republicans talk about inflation, it is bewildering and totally discrediting for them to reflexively oppose a qualified nominee like Ms. Cook, precisely tasked with helping the Fed hold down costs and maintain strong employment. Nevertheless, we will move forward with her nomination today with a motion to discharge. The bottom line is this: The Fed is not a political institution. Ms. Cook's position is not a political role. And for Republicans to obstruct her nomination purely for political purposes is deeply troubling and hurts our efforts to lower costs for American families.

AMERICA COMPETES ACT OF 2022

Mr. President, and now on the competitiveness legislation, last night, with a strong bipartisan vote of 68 to 28, the Senate passed an amended version of the House jobs and competitiveness legislation. It was amended and passed, to be clear, with the same language the Senate approved last summer when we approved USICA, the U.S. Innovation and Competition Act.

This bill now heads to the House, and I am optimistic that the House will be able to act on a motion requesting a conference committee very soon. It remains our goal to initiate a conference committee by the end of this work period.

Once again, I want to thank all of my colleagues for their good-faith work on this bill. This is the culmination of years of work on both sides of the aisle. Senator YOUNG and I began work on the Endless Frontier Act in 2019. There is more work to be done, but we, never-

theless, took an important step last night toward our goal of enacting this legislation into law.

And in doing so, I believe that this bill will go down as one of the most important steps Congress can take toward creating more jobs, fixing our supply chains, and refueling another generation of American ingenuity that will strengthen our economy for a long, long time.

CORONAVIRUS

Mr. President, on COVID, I am continuing to hold negotiations with my Republican colleagues on much needed COVID public health response funding. Even though cases and deaths and hospitalizations are, thankfully, down and falling across the board, it is still necessary and a matter of great urgency that we replenish funding for more vaccines, more therapeutics, more testing, and for new vaccines to meet the challenge of any new variant. The sooner we have these in place when, God forbid, a new variant hits, the healthier we will stay, the more life will stay normal. To deny it now, and then 3 months from now or 6 months from now, or whenever, be unprepared and let it spread unchecked until the COVID variant's tentacles are too deep in our society, makes no sense whatsoever.

But to pass more COVID public health response funding, we need bipartisan cooperation. It is a responsibility of both Republicans and Democrats to make sure we have the tools and resources in place that will keep the virus down, keep our schools, keep our communities open.

We are not there yet on reaching an agreement, but we are going to keep working in good faith to get there. I hope we can reach an agreement with our Republican colleagues very soon because nobody wants to find themselves in a situation where cases suddenly start rising again, and we aren't ready to respond quickly.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RECOGNITION OF THE MINORITY LEADER

The Republican leader is recognized.

INFLATION

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, Democrats' massive inflation is an inescapable, painful, daily reality for working families. These policy failures have hammered my home State of Kentucky. Last year, even as many Kentuckians earned raises, prices skyrocketed faster. Used car prices shot up 40 percent in the Commonwealth last year. In Louisville, the gas to drive those cars costs more than a dollar more per gallon today than a year ago.

In typical Bluegrass fashion, neighbors are helping one another as best they can. According to the owner of Parkette Drive-In in Lexington, even as prices for ingredients like chicken have nearly doubled, he has chosen to cut back as much as possible on his end to avoid raising prices for customers.

But as hard as Kentuckians try, Democrats' reckless policies are coming home to roost. As one father of four who lost his job following the devastating Mayfield tornado in December put it, "there's no stretching money at this point."

An outright majority of Americans say inflation is not at all under control. Seven in 10 say our economy is in bad shape, and by all accounts, they know exactly whom to blame for a year of painful challenges.

Sixty-three percent of Americans, nearly two-thirds, say they disapprove of how President Biden is handling the economy, and that number just keeps rising.

But Washington Democrats do not appear to have gotten the message. The Biden administration's new budget proposal leans even further into the policies that got us here in the first place.

Even as President Biden has already presided over soaring prices for gas and home heating fuels, he wants massive new tax hikes on American-made fossil fuels. He wants to skyrocket discretionary domestic spending on a whole catalog of liberal wish-list items, and he wants to compound the pain on our economy by slapping the biggest tax hikes in American history right on top of all of it.

So the past year has taught us how painful Washington Democrats' policies can be for hard-working Americans. The administration needs to stop trying to dig this hole any deeper.

FOREIGN POLICY

Mr. President, now, on another matter, runaway inflation and historic tax hikes aren't the only signs that President Biden's budget was crafted in fantasyland. And, amazingly, yesterday, even as the Biden administration was proposing the biggest tax hikes in American history, that wasn't even the biggest problem of the day.

Most of President Biden's press conference yesterday focused on seemingly major inconsistencies between his public remarks on foreign policy and the actual policy of his administration. A few days ago, President Biden seemed to dramatically change American policy toward Putin's regime during a major international speech before White House staff walked back his comment. Yesterday, the President suggested he was just sharing his personal moral view, not speaking in his policymaking capacity.

We are talking about the Commander in Chief here.

Another time recently, the President seemed to suggest that if Russia violated international law and used chemical weapons in Ukraine, the United States would respond "in kind." Again,

his staff had to quickly explain what the administration actually meant.

The United States does not maintain a chemical weapons stockpile for use. To the contrary, we are working hard to safely dispose of many decades-old munitions.

I know a lot about that. Throughout my career in Washington, I have worked to ensure the stockpile of chemical munitions at the Blue Grass Army Depot in my State are safely but surely disposed of.

But the head-scratching gaffes don't stop there. After spending weeks gratuitously listing all the things America would not do, such as deploy troops into Ukraine, President Biden in Poland seemed to tell American troops they would soon be seeing the bravery of Ukraine's resistance firsthand in person. Again, the White House claimed the President was not actually changing policy.

The troubling inconsistencies go beyond isolated gaffes. The confusion appears to run deeper. For months, White House officials repeatedly insisted the President and his administration were focused on deterring Russian escalation against Ukraine. They repeatedly stressed how the threat of sanctions would serve as a deterrent against further invasion.

But last week, with the world watching, President Biden shockingly claimed he never thought or intended that sanctions would actually deter Putin. This leaves unanswered the question of what he thought they would achieve.

The wild swings between the administration's overly cautious, almost skittish official posture and the President's emotional freelancing is becoming dizzying.

As NATO allies scrambled to help Ukraine fight back, the President refused to authorize a transfer of fighter jets. The administration strangely and unjustifiably felt if we merely facilitated—facilitated—such a transfer, it could be too provocative. But we are supposed to brush it off when the same President seems to actually call for regime change in Russia? Facilitating the transfer of some old fighter jets is too provocative, but remarks like that are just speaking from the heart?

Sadly, mixed messages and confusion have been one of the only consistent threads running through this administration's foreign policy from the very start. The White House chafed against clear warnings from its own military advisers about how quickly Afghanistan could fall after U.S. withdrawal. They stood by the President's assertion that "there's going to be no circumstance where you see people being lifted off the roof of an embassy of the United States," until that exact scene happened in Kabul.

With respect to both the Taliban and Putin, the administration has said repeatedly they think that the fear of becoming international pariahs will actually constrain their actions—as if these regimes cared a lick about global PR.

At the risk of repeating what I and many others have said for years, despots can't be shamed into conforming to polite international society. You can't check lawless violence with finger wagging.

We know what deters aggression: American strength and American clarity. That is what deters aggression.

I have just explained how American clarity has been in too-short supply. But, unfortunately, the Biden administration also seems unwilling to plan and invest in long-term American strength.

Even under the administration's wildly—wildly—optimistic projections about inflation, their budget proposal would only flat-fund our Armed Forces. In the best case scenario, they want American defense to just tread water, nowhere near the robust real growth that bipartisan experts say we need to modernize and keep pace with both Russia and China.

And in the more likely event that Democrats don't magically have inflation plummeting in just a few months, then President Biden's policy would amount to an actual cut—cut—to our defense spending, ramping down American military funding while China ramps theirs up.

China is building for the battlefield of the future. Iran continues funding terrorists and plowing forward with nuclear development. Russian aggression is actively challenging our capacity to keep ourselves and our partners armed.

And the Biden administration sees this as a moment to ease off the gas?

That could not be more mistaken.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

The Republican whip.

NOMINATION OF KETANJI BROWN JACKSON

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, last week's Judiciary Committee hearing gave Senators the opportunity to hear directly from President Biden's nominee to the Supreme Court, Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, to help them decide whether she is an appropriate candidate for the Nation's highest Court.

My approach to deciding whether or not to vote for a Supreme Court nominee or any judicial nominee is pretty simple. I look at the character and qualifications, and most of all, I look at the question of whether the nominee understands the limited role of the judiciary and the separation of powers.

Our Federal Government, of course, has three distinct branches: the legislative branch, which makes the laws; the executive branch—the President and executive Departments—which executes the laws; and the judiciary,